

2008

Review of Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*

James F. McGrath

Butler University, jfmcgrat@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGrath, James F., "Review of Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*" *Exploring Our Matrix* / (2008): -.

Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

Review of Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008). ISBN 978-0-8308-2568-4. 443 pp.

In his latest book, Kenneth Bailey provides further study of the New Testament Gospels from the perspective that has been his own unique contribution over the past three decades or so. There is no other New Testament scholar who is a native speaker of English and yet who has grown up, lived and taught in the Middle East and been fluent in Arabic, and as a result has been able to mediate the cultural perspective of that region on the New Testament to English-speaking readers.

The introduction should not be skipped, since it emphasizes the importance of the unique perspective Bailey offers and the neglected sources he utilizes. Bailey draws heavily not only on his own experience of life in the Middle East, but also the neglected witness of Christian authors writing in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke) and Arabic over the centuries.

Part 1 is “The Birth of Jesus”, and the [first chapter](#) includes information on what typical rural homes in Palestine are like. Among scholars, Bailey’s argument about the cultural background of these stories, and in particular the likelihood that Jesus was born in a rural peasant home rather than an “inn”, has been found persuasive not only because of the points Bailey makes about the cultural setting (including the nature of hospitality and travel in this part of the world in the first century and even today, and the fact that feeding troughs (or mangers) were and are typically found in homes rather than separate barns or stables), but also because the term for a commercial “inn” is not found in the story. His conclusions about Luke’s story are here made available to a wider audience, in greater detail than in his earlier publications on the subject. This material alone would be worth the price of the book.

Part 2 is “The Beatitudes”, and Part 3 is “The Lord’s Prayer”. The latter unfortunately does not explicitly address the popular notion that *abba* means “daddy”, but nonetheless highlights what clearly was the distinctive characteristic of Jesus’ use of *abba* as a way of addressing God: Aramaic-speaking Jews in the first century still used Hebrew for the purpose of prayer, and so Jesus was praying, and teaching his disciples to pray, in their own vernacular (p.95). The mystery of what the Greek word that lies behind the all-too-familiar English rendering of “*daily*” bread may mean is elucidated by appeal to the Old Syriac version of the Gospels, which uses the adjective *ameno* which means “lasting, never ceasing” (p.121).

Part 4 covers “Dramatic Actions of Jesus”. In chapter 13, crucial cultural background is provided to the stories of the healing of blind Bartimaeus and Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus. Too often readers of these stories do not have an adequate understanding of the cultural realities of the time. What was the situation of a blind beggar, and what would the situation of such a person be if they recovered their

sight? Would a powerful member of the community climb a tree? To what extent was Zacchaeus exaggerating when he said he'd give away half his assets, and to what extent was such exaggeration culturally appropriate? Bailey addresses all these subjects, and more, in a fascinating way.

Part 5 is about Jesus and women, and here too Bailey draws on his knowledge of cultural norms, including appropriate and inappropriate turns of phrase in various contexts. Such evidence (pp.192-193) points clearly not only to Jesus having had female disciples, but also to their involvement in his public activity. Bailey interprets a number of Jesus' actions as turning the community's wrath from other marginalized figures onto himself, and thus emphasis is placed on Jesus' "costly love" even prior to the crucifixion.

Part 6 is entitled "Parables of Jesus". Bailey often emphasizes the open-ended character of parables, and at one point notes that even ones that seem final may be open-ended, since "In the Middle East the word *no* is never an answer, rather it is a pause in the negotiations" (p.273). Jesus the storyteller is presented as a "metaphorical theologian" (pp.279-280). Although some of the same parables are included here as in Bailey's earlier books, there is no redundancy. New angles and insights are offered, and much new food for thought is provided.

In addition to the detailed analysis of New Testament texts, Bailey's book is full of delightful anecdotes from his own experience and from the Middle Eastern world that he knows so well. I highly recommend this book. English-speaking readers of the Bible need to be confronted with other cultural readings, to make us more aware of our own assumptions and the way they lead us to interpret these texts.